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Electric Fingertips

Tali Beckwith-Cohen

School of the Arts

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Electric Fingertips

My hands are cold when I wake up. The windows are frosted with residue from last night's storm, the crystals of snow, visible and well defined. Each one is different. I take a deep breath and summon all the warmth left in my lungs, expelling it onto the freezing glass. I watch as the snowflakes are devoured by my breath and turn into tiny little tears. I wonder if these small pearls of liquid can retain the patterns of the crystals they once were, or if each unique pattern becomes lost as it melts into a uniformed river flowing down my window pane.

On my walk to work, I keep my hands pocketed, trying to defrost them. A nurse needs warm hands. I have learned that the warmth of a gentle touch can heal someone better than pills and drugs. I wiggle my fingers and try to send electric sparks through their tips. For a moment, I feel the familiar sting of my nerves going haywire, but it dies, smothered by this impenetrable cold.

The hospital's beds sit in long rows, just how I left them last night, and just how I will find them tomorrow. Nothing ever changes here except for the patients, and even they begin to look similar after a while. Sickness gives the same makeover to anyone who is housing it. My fellow nurses say health is the only remedy to restore their previous expression, but I think that is wrong. I think that once sickness has permanently moved in, once it has carved out a space for itself in the chambers of your heart where you can feel it, pulsing and aching, you can find a way to look like your truest self again. Sickness can liberate you. I have seen it happen.

Marty Hudson is a man who has been with us for months. His sleeping figure, shrouded in blankets, has become a familiar decoration. He smiles at me as I peel back his curtain. He looks forward to any company, especially mine. His teeth are revolting, yellowed and rotting, but I force myself to look him in the face and greet him.

"How are we today?" I ask.

"Just fine, just fine," he answers, but I can tell he is lying by the way he winces as he lifts his neck to speak. It is funny how some patients try so hard to mask their pain. They don't want to draw attention to their weakness, especially in front of the people they like. I am one of those people. The doctors think it is because I work hard. The nurses think it is because I am young and remind old men of their daughters. They do not know about the sparks in my fingers.

I look at the pillbox in my hand and smile up at him. "Ready for your painkiller?"

He tries to casually nod, but I can see the desperation in his eyes. I hand him the capsule and a plastic cup of orange juice. His hand shakes as he raises it to his lips. Little drops of juice slip down his chin and onto his pillow. As I watch him, I rub my hands together, gathering their moisture and igniting the nerves in my fingertips. I step closer to him as I take back the cup, and place my hand on his arm with careful precision. I feel his muscle stiffen, then relax. I close my eyes and feel myself sink below external contact, imagining my nerves attached to his, like a bridge between us. I can feel his pain, feel his aching joints and how he longs for the past. Through my palm, resting on his cracked skin, I feel how lonely he is, day after day in the same bed. It almost overwhelmed me, but I accept his sorrow like a gift, and in return I send him my warmth. I push it through the pores of his skin, sending all my youth and electricity into his bloodstream. I hold his arm until I see his eyes soften, then, I let go. As quickly as it had come, I feel his pain dissipate inside me, and I watch as the temporary strength I have given him leaves his expression.

Mr. Hudson smiles up at me again, but this time he is sincere. "Thank you," he says. He does not know what he is thanking me for. They never do, but it is enough. I am not smart or pretty, bold or brave, but I have my fingers, and the look on Mr. Hudson's face after I have touched him fills me with pride.

People are afraid of sickness, afraid to get too close to it. I am not, and that is why my touch is electric.

I leave Mr. Hudson and move on to other patients. By lunch, I have felt the anger of a woman who will never walk again, the frustration of a young man dependent on tubes in his stomach, and the fear of a child, whose mother may never wake back up. Although these feelings leave me as soon as I relinquish my grip on those who truly possess them, they haunt me throughout the day, reminding me just how much pain there is in the world. When I am assigned a new patient, I am praying that they will have some minor affliction, some small laughable accident that will not require the healing powers in my fingers. I fear I do not have enough strength left to send. I am distressed to learn she is treated for cystic fibrosis.

As I peel back the curtain to her bed, I see that she is sleeping, breathing peacefully. The sight is almost funny. A woman with wires hooking her up to a machine, at peace in her dreams. There is no one there with her, no one kneeling over her bed, praying she will recover. She is all alone.

I am careful as I take her heart beat. She stays asleep. I stop to look at her, to take her in. Her face is rounded, her features soft like a child's. I guess she is about 30, just a few years older than me, but she looks youthful. Her eyelids flutter with each inhale of breath she takes.

Her hair is short, falling just above her shoulders in frizzy curls.

Curiosity makes my fingers start to tingle. I want to know who this woman is and how she came to be in this bed. I want to brush my fingers against her skin, but I restrain myself. I will wait until she is awake, otherwise it feels like I am invading her. I don't want to invade, I want to heal.

She stirs. I continue to measure her blood pressure. She stirs again, and I take her temperature. Her eyes crack open at the beeping sound of the thermometer. I smile at her as she tries to get a hold of her surroundings. It takes her a few short moments of panic to remember what happens, then she sinks back into her mattress. Her eyes are foggy, drugged out. Her mouth opens, trying to form words, but she finds her voice is cracked and dry. The woman looks away and by instinct I reach for her hand. Her skin is soft.

I feel the familiar sensation of sinking as my nerves latch on to hers. I send sparks down, through my arm and try to find her, to let her in. Slowly, like molasses, fear and despair slip up my arm. I brace myself, make myself remember that these feelings are not mine, that they belong to the woman I am touching. Sometimes I have to remind myself. I summon all my strength and try to let it melt down my veins and into hers. I see her eyes relax, and know my electric fingers are working, but then, all the sudden, her eyes harden again. She yanks her arm away from me and the world takes shape again. She frowns and rolls over, eyeing me resentfully. I stare down at my finger and wonder if they are failing me. I walk out of her room confused. This has never happened. No one has ever rejected my healing fingers.

That night when I lie in bed I think about the woman. It doesn't make sense. Why would she pull away? Why would anyone reject the relief I can give them? Especially a patient with cystic fibrosis. I have seen cases like hers. They hardly lived past thirty and when they do their lives are full of suffering. Why would she not accept my fingers like the gift they are? As I drift into a fitful sleep, my resentment turns into hurt. I am hurt that she didn't want the only thing I have to offer. That night I dream that when I touch the girl, my hands are hot coals and she cries out in pain. "Don't touch me!"

I wake up with my hands clenched and a whole nights worth of resentment tugging my lips into a scowl. I catch my reflection in the mirror and silently vow to help as many people as I can today. I will prove to myself that my fingers can work miracles. I feel the sparks already flying through my fingertips as I dress and tug on my worn out tennis shoes. My walk to work today takes half the time it normally does because my steps are quickened by determination.

By the time I enter my first patient's room my hands are itching with excess energy.

I memorize the expression on each sick person's face as I flood their nerves with relief and hope. I commit to heart how the tense muscles around their mouths relax, almost into a smile. Each small expression of gratitude I receive wells up inside me, warm and comforting. It slowly begins to push out the confusion over the girl who pushed me away. I am starting to think of her as a mere hiccup, a medical mystery, when I pass by her room and am reminded of my humiliation. Every inch of me wants to stop and look in on her, to prove to her that my fingers work. I want to make her need their electricity and watch her eyes fill with gratitude. I want to make her accept my gift, because it is all I have to offer, and she was rude to refuse it.

I slowly enter her room for the second time. She is still alone, no trace of a grieving family. Today she is reading a magazine. She puts it down as I enter, glaring at me. "Good morning," I say. She doesn't respond, and I pretend to be reading her monitor. She picks up the magazine again. In a split second decision I reach for a thermometer. "Can I see your forehead for a moment?"

She scowls and lifts her frizzy curls up for me to place my instrument. As I lower the thermometer, I carefully make sure my fingers make contact with her skin. It is warm to my touch. I start to send her my sparks, carrying with them all the healing thoughts that I possess. I frantically push them down my arm, knowing I have mere seconds to convince her to let me heal her before she pulls away. She is quicker to catch me this time.

"Stop doing that," she says. Her voice is not loud. She does not yell like she did in my dream, and yet her voice is commanding. I remove my fingers from her skin. "Stop doing that, stop making me feel strong," she says again. This time her voice is less sharp. This time it is broken. I bury my hands in my pockets, ashamed. In the moment, I thought I was helping her, but her discouraged face makes me feel like the bad guy. I have never forcefully used my electricity before and it felt wrong. My fingers buzz with anger, anger at myself for not fighting the urge I had. I should have just let her be.

The girl's hateful eyes push me out the door, but I stop with my hand on the door knob. I turn around quickly and say the word that has been bouncing on the tip of my tongue since the first time she pushed me away.

"Why?"

The girl doesn't respond.

"Why don't you want it?"

The girl smirks. "Because I am going to die anyway, no matter how strong a freak like you can make me feel."

"But don't you want to feel strong again?"

“No, I don’t want to feel strong. I want to be strong.” Her voice is cold, but it is no longer venomous. The words she is saying are what scare me. They threaten everything I thought I knew. They threaten the electric sparks in my fingertips.

“You don’t want hope?” I accuse, one more time, desperately clinging.

“Not if it is false.”

I leave her room and make my way to a supply closet. I shut the door and stare at my fingers in the darkness, my one gift. False Hope. The words seem to echo through the empty closet. I can’t escape them. I think of Mr. Hudson, who has been barely alive for months, who knows each breath could be his last. I think of all the times I have given him strength. Was I lying to him through my fingers? Was I giving him a lick of something he would never be able to taste for more than the few seconds I made contact with his skin? He was going to die soon. Perhaps my fingers were just prolonging his suffering by giving him something false to live for.

The line between healing and hurting had always been so clear to me. My fingers and I had always effortlessly fit on one side, but this girl was blurring it, and for the first time ever, I wasn’t sure where I belonged. I was lost.

A loud beeping sound coming from down the hallway interrupts my thoughts. Any hospital employee can recognize that sound. It is the sound of coding. I gather myself and rush out of the room, following the sound until it reaches the same girl’s room, the room I just left. Her body is convulsing as she reaches for breaths she cannot find. Two doctors are already trying to ventilate her, and it is my job to hold her down. As I quickly approach her, I see the panic on her face. The cool, hard features are gone, replaced by fear. The moment she has been prepared for all her life has finally come, and she is terrified. She looks like a completely new person.

Although she is barely conscious, I know she recognizes the hands on her shoulder. Her frantic eyes dart towards me. They are pleading for something, but I am not sure what. Subconsciously, my nerves begin to reach for hers. I try to stop them, but I can’t. I feel her terror wash up my arm, and I know I need to give her something back, but strength and hope are all I know how to give, and she has made me question them.

Her monitor is going haywire now. The doctors begin to slow down. Trying to save her life is only protocol now. It is only so that we can tell her family we did all we could. I need to give her something. I can’t let her die with that fear in her eyes, I don’t realize what I am doing until I feel something new slipping through my nerves and into hers. Courage. I reach down inside myself and summon up courage. I imagine tiny soldiers marching down my arm and

standing beside the girl as her death approaches. They do not fight, they just salute her and hold her hand as she takes the last few steps of her life. The girl's body relaxes as I continue to force bravery into her arm, and then her eyes soften. She lies perfectly still as the monitor continues to speed up. I watch as her hands unclench and her mouth becomes fierce. For a second I can see the girl she could be. For a second I can see who she was underneath the sickness. My fingers become so warm I think they will burn. Then the monitor stops beeping and all emotions wash out of my arm, all except acceptance, which I realize is mine. I release my grip on her shoulder and watch the girl. She looks like she could be sleeping, resting, dreaming. I imagine her eyes opening and the true girl inside her waking up, the girl without fear and full of hope. The girl who faced death with courage, and let the feeling free her.

Tali Beckwith-Cohen
School of the Arts, Grade 10